DISPARATE MINDS

MAKEOVER

Makeover!

A *Disparate Minds* Short Story
By Plum Pudding
Edited by Ostara Gale & Aristide Twain

PUBLISHED BY THE CHESHIRE HOUSE

Copyright © Plum Pudding 2024

All rights reserved.

This story is a work of fiction, any resemblance between it, and persons living or dead, or events past or present, is purely coincidental. Any resemblance between them and other narratives or stories is purely coincidental, or done firmly within the bounds of parody or satire. Names, characters, locations, and events featured in this publication are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

The right of Plum Pudding to be identified as the author of this work is asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Avenue, *Disparate Minds* characters & concepts, Serena Taj © Plum Pudding

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."
— *Audre Lorde*

"When Heaven's in the music, Hell is in control —
The angels got the voices, But the Devil got the Rock and Roll!"
— Cosmo and Nation, *Shock Treatment* (1981)

"Makeover!"

A Fortune of Reversals, The Fame Game, Miss Congeniality, Looking for Trade Where Things are Hollow, And Pale Arrivals

"Serena, can you tell me how long these thoughts have been happening?"

The Therapist looked at me with a steady and compromising eye.

He had a young face, though it was heavily bearded. I didn't want to tell him anything. I didn't know him well, and he was kind of gross, though not in a way you could see.

"I *don't* have a *problem*," I said. I tried to put steel into the words. To make'm get what I was *going for* here. "There isn't a problem with what I think about. I think about *normal* things."

"A girl your age shouldn't have such a preoccupation with violence," the Therapist told me.

His name, for the record, wasn't just 'the Therapist'; it was James, I think. But I wasn't calling him that. He was *the Therapist*. I nodded subtly to make him think I agreed with him about the violence stuff.

He continued to talk. He sure was a talker. "Your family has a *history* with mental illness. We have to be aware of warning signs."

"Warning signs of what?" I asked, probably too aggressively.

Which is not a good mistake to make when you're trying to convince a guy that you're well-adjusted and you don't have a violence problem.

"Psychosis, depression, sociopathic tendencies," he answered, all too freely — then, quickly, as if to distract from the negative thought: "How are you doing at school?"

"I don't go to school," I told him. "Never have."

It was the truth. Anthea made some attempts over the years, but nothing proper. I had to learn on my own.

"You *should* go to school."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I don't," I said.

(I'm not sorry, but I say it anyway. I know Manners.)

"Homeschooled, then." He made a little note on his planner.

Now me, I wasn't sure exactly what to say to that. Never heard the word. So I guessed, based on how it was a word-combo-thing. School at home. Sure, I'd had something like that.

"Anthea taught me what she felt like teaching me," I told him, and it was true enough.

"Therein lies the problem with homeschooling. Forgive me, Serena, but you do come across as socially adversarial to say the least."

Socially adversarial. I swear to god. Say big words like I don't know what those mean.

"How about I tell you a true story?" I said to him, "It'll shut you up, and it'll keep you real updated about what I've been doin'."

He nodded. He organized his little pens next to his planner.

"Of course. Don't mind me."

* * *

Look, I'm embarrassed that this whole thing happened at all. I was stupid. Real stupid. I have to say that before we get started, or else I'm gonna look like a real asshole. Okay? Okay.

Alright, so it was a few weeks after Christmas and Avenue was dirty. It's always got this air of decomposition about it, but you know. Especially grimy and miserable. That's what I'm trying to say.

It's a good time. I've seen the place worse. And I do love it, the shithole. It's home. But still, it was real nasty right then. We were on a Haunt Hunt, visiting the landmarks, following a signal. It was as it always is.

I'm in the backseat of the van as it rattles along the longroad. June is sitting next to me, she's looking her usual self, all… held together by string and well-wishes. Anthea's driving, and the whole van smells of cigarette smoke, because there's one in her mouth. She should quit. Those cigarettes are the one thing about us I fucking hate.

Wick is sitting beside Anthea in the front seat for once, and they're holding a MacGyver-ed hunk of a steadily-beeping doodad. It's guiding the van towards its destination, a decrepit CVS. They're littered over Avenue, rarely in good condition. This one's a Haunt, and the beeping says that something is coming.

I'm all business, and so are the others at first, focused on their relative tasks or just sitting still. I'm sharpening my bow-knife, Wick is holding the beeper and Anthea is driving and smoking. But then June starts asking questions, and she sets off Wick, who is by far the most talkative. So it's hard to focus on the bow-knife and I set it down to listen.

"So, if this is a haunt and I came out of a haunt, what are we going to expect?" June asked.

"Oh, a person, probably," Wick answered. "People who get caught in Avenue have to end up somewhere, and it's usually the Haunts, where things are thin. At least that's what Anthea says."

"Things are thin," Anthea repeated.

"Okay, but what about the 'probably'?" June asked. "You mentioned a 'probably'."

"It could also be something else." Wick said. "I mean, your doppelgänger — the meat mailbox…"

"I'm sorry, *the meat mailbox?"*

"A living mailbox with human organs in it," Wick replied. "Saw it in the woods."

"Why does nobody keep me updated about things like a *meat mailbox?!"* June complained, spiraling a little. "I think, going forward, I should know, I should be *notified* — if anyone — *anyone* encounters abominations including, but not limited to, *meat mailboxes!* Okay!"

"Well, I'm telling you now. It was back when I saw the ghosts."

June sighed, the sentence proving her point. "No offence, but sometimes I feel I'm the only person around here who reacts to these things reasonably." She glared at Anthea with disapproval. "Please keep me informed about horrors beyond my comprehension, for I would like to avoid them."

"Okay," Wick answered, Anthea still silent as the grave. "But we're still going to avoid mentioning the thing Todd saw that apparently none of us are allowed to talk about."

This went on for some time.

* * *

The Haunt, which we quickly rolled into — upon, whatever — was what the artists in the abattoir I worked in had often called 'demolition chic.'.

It was a mass of broken wall and rubble, with electrical wiring hanging here and there. There was this dusty suggestion that it may have once been a normal place. You could see that in the powdered ruin: scant ideas of the prototypical American CVS Pharmacy. Places that were everywhere.

This *felt* kinda everywhere. But only in Avenue would you climb into a CVS's corpse.

We made our way past the stuck automatic door, which flickered with sparks, and climbed over a few knocked-over shelves — and then we found him, near the photo printers, in the front.

He was caught in what Anthea called a 'transitive state'. I don't know how to summarise this bit, so bear with me: he… was the wall. He was a *part* of the wall. But then he wasn't. We all recognised him, I mean, he was famous. Even the inklings of the real world that got into Avenue reflected that. Stray TV transmissions: he had guest-starred on *Drag Race*. And little fragments of advertisements: he had worked for Sephora. Had his own 80s-style Clothing Brand, even.

Suffice to say that Janus Hartthorne needed no introduction. Excepting perhaps to us, and only, you know, for his sake. I suppose I have to admit I was a little awestruck from the beginning.

I don't really remember what June and Wick… what they *call* the real world. I mean, I remember the last time I saw my Mom at the Curry Place. And I remember my Dad's moustache, but not the rest of his face. Anyway, most everything — it's second hand. I don't know their world, not really. And I miss it. I mean. If you can miss something you don't know. 'Cuz I sure don't.

I look for those stray transmissions and advertisements, and I say it's as an artist, but really, it's as a person, a normal lonely person. The slips of 'real-world' paper I find in the wind or in a long-dead Haunt, I don't put them in a collage like I say. I collect them in a little tin box under my bed, I look at them sometimes, and I will *kill you* if you tell June about this. But it's true.

"You're Janus Hartthorne," I told him, in a bit of shock.

And he — well, picture this, he looks at me with a weird slow look because he's only just remembering that himself. The aria's probably buzzing around his skull and his hand, his hand is shaking of its own accord. He looks at it like a hippie on a drug trip. You know, like… *woah, dude!* Like that.

So June placed a hand on his shoulder. She was shaking too, but it was more of a resonance. Out of sympathy. Could she hear what he was hearing? I didn't know. Still don't. After a while she put the hand down, going a bit… apathetic. None of us knew what to do.

He brushed his long, straight brown hair out of his face and patted down his torn purple suit like he was looking for a pen.

"Janus Heart…Thorn…"

"Yes," I said. "Janus Hartthorne."

And then he's the first person in all of Avenue to remember their last name.

* * *

He was thankful. *Indebted,* he said, a bit too suavely, and we took him back to town in the van. As we went out of the CVS, June kept turning and looking behind her, as if she expected another Janus to pop up from behind a cash register.

So we took him down to Debby's, served him a proper meal and, you know, tried and get him adjusted. Wick did most of the talking, as per usual. They had a lot in common, except they didn't. Wick was trying to live. Janus was trying to perform. He kept looking at me, with this strange fascination. Really peering, like — through a magnifying glass.

Debby came out and offered the food on the house, because there'd never really been a celebrity here, not an Earthly one anyway. The waitresses kept flocking over, Anna and Shirley and Brent and loads of others. I looked for Cherry, but Debby told me she'd been fired.

And before you know it, Janus is signing autographs. After he has some coffee and pancakes for dinner, he climbs atop one of the vacant tables and starts singing *Little Red Corvette.* He's spinning, and singing… It was all a bit… incredible. Over the top, really. When do you get a singer standing on a table at *Debby's?* A more incongruous sight I've never seen.

"I'm your own private Beethoven," he said, slicking back his long hair.

I rolled my eyes. Acted like that was a normal thing to say.

Yeah, he was a bit gross, but he was a celebrity. I had never seen that. None of us had. I keep making excuses about him now — but we all have our sad stories. I shouldn't have been taken in by his. I grew up fighting gang

members on my way to the store with pieces of broken glass. You hear about people growing up in the gutter, and I saw that happen. I saw that happen every day, not as a metaphor, but when I passed kids my age on my way back to Anthea's — kids who lived in a sewer pipe to keep out the cold. So I did grow up that way, but I didn't. I was lucky. Most nights I had food. The truth is, I don't have excuses to make. I just keep pretending that I do.

* * *

It was a few days with him adjusting to the town and all that before he asked me about 'looks'. It started with him, really. He was a little self-focused. We were at *The Slice,* this new place that had opened up. It was a little more 'electronica' than *Insolence's* 'splinters and taxidermy' vibe. LED lights. Fog machines and disco. Very Janus, and he immediately attached himself to it.

Anyway, despite Terrance's grumblings about competitors, we were visiting the place. Anthea didn't come, it was me, Wick, June and the sort of entourage that Janus had established.

But yeah, like I said, it started with him. He was commenting on a split hair he had. And yeah, it was getting a bit ratty. It was um, something about how unsightly it was, I really can't remember. It happened a bit fast. He was always so focused on the right products, making everything *fit.*

June said something about it looking perfectly fine, and it might have stopped there. She placated him perfectly. Bit of a white lie, but a good one.

Wick, bless him, told the truth. He really thought that was what Janus wanted. "Oh, what's in it? Is it dyed?"

Janus smiled thinly. It was this lie of a smile. There was nothing under it.

The evening went on. The conversation was just avoided. It was a choice, I think, thinking back on it. It was a conscious choice he made. Anytime Janus didn't like something, he ended it. But none of us even noticed, really.

After a while, Wick and June were drinking. I didn't feel like drinking that night. I mean, technically speaking I'm too young anyway, but no one cares what I do. And yet. I don't know. I felt off. I didn't feel like it. Fuck.

There's this thing about bars. At least for me? They feel like parties where you don't know anyone. You can be friendly, sure. Occasionally you'll get a fulfilling conversation with someone or some dude will flirt with you or whatever. But those are the little times. Most of the time there's this huge solitude in the packed room.

I had been to a large number of bars before. There are loads in Avenue. They're really easy to find. It's like they grow. But they don't feel right to me. None of them feel right —- no, um, Insolence is a good one. But I… I live there. That's hardly a bar. That hardly counts.

I'm sorry, I'm having such a tough time explaining how —

"You're really beautiful," he told me. I was in a booth with Janus and I had three shots in me. Wick had already left. I think he *had* to leave, like someone made him. I was feeling heady, woozy. The room was ringing a bit. I don't want to exaggerate how plastered I was or anything. I wasn't feeling stupid.

I think I told him to piss off and stop being such a creep. But maybe I was already a bit different, even then. Maybe the room was too cold.

i'm just a girl oh little old me well don't let me out of your sight

"I'm not flirting with you, goodness," he laughed. "Unless you… well…" He was so pink. I think it was the lights. It was dark. So it must have been the neon lights that made him all sparkling. "I'm really just speaking anatomically."

fame and fortune and some interesting brilliant life i'm supposed to be having but i'm afraid these sweet thoughts

I could smell iodine in the water. I was having an antiseptic dream.

"You know, you could be famous."

Janus smiled. He used to have braces, but he didn't anymore. I don't know how I knew that. And then I kept seeing a hand, a disconnected hand —

And then I was out of it.

"Hey," June said. "Leave her alone. She's plastered."

Janus nodded. He was concerned. "Will she be alright?" He asked.

"Yeah," said June. "She just needs to rest. Can't you see it?"

"Maybe we should call it a night." Janus said, carefully.

June nodded, and she seemed more confident, in control, than I can remember ever seeing her. She had her hands on her hips, and was standing like a hero. "Yeah. Yeah, we should!" She said, venomously. "Come on!"

Elvis has left the building!

* * *

I was still drunk and slipping in and out of it all, and she was tucking me into bed like I was her little sister. My room was cold and I felt too tall.

"I could hear you," June said, slipping the blankets around my shoulders. "You were crying, but not out loud."

"I'm fine," I tried to tell her.

"Serena, let's talk about this in the morning."

For someone who could supposedly hear me, she wasn't listening.

"Janus is bad news," she told me. "I know it seems like he's David Bowie but he's really, really, not."

"Fuck off," I said through the covers of my pillow. It probably sounded something like 'Mmpphh mmmppphhh'. But we were honest with each other like that.

I was fine. And I wasn't just saying that. I was better than fine.

For the first time in my life, someone *smart* was saying that I was beautiful. It was great. It was like apricots.

I was weary and tired and hardly moving and had way too much beer in my head and it was sloshing about like a sinus infection, but I just couldn't fall asleep, everything was exciting, everything was magnetic, incredible, the bee's knees. On and on and on and on and on and on and on. I kept slipping back

and forth, jolting out of dreams. Every few minutes, adrenaline would whisper it's song to me:

You are going to be famous

You are going to be famous

You are going to be famous

* * *

The next morning, the hangover had blurred the room like opaque glass. I lay in my bed for hours, and I won't lie to you; I was still thinking about him. I mean, they say not to meet your heroes. But also they say 'long in the tooth' and that doesn't make any fucking sense either.

You know, I don't think he was quite a big deal before I met him. Well, I recognised him, but you know, I recognise loads of people I don't care about. It's just… weird. Suddenly he really, really mattered.

I wasn't complaining.

It was anticipation. It was like waiting to rush down the stairs on Christmas Morning. The excitement of that, coiled up inside your chest as you look at the wooden walls, and slowly, slowly turn your head to look past those walls, towards where the tree is.

And just like a present, there he was, sitting by the coffee table. He was slick, suave, austere all of a sudden. Wearing a nice black suit. It worked for him. Showed off his hips. Which I noticed.

He was very calm and his wristwatch was glass. He was sipping from a mug of some kind of brew and he was sitting there like this was his home. I have to say that made me feel weird. I got over it. I was glad he was there. I sat down to eat cereal.

I got the cereal from a gas station the other day. It was a marvel it was edible. I placed the dry kibble-like substance in my mouth, chewed, and felt like shit. All the while he calmly watched my bizarre ritual as if it was worth some sort of *credit*. The oddest feeling of *pride*.

"There's going to be a pageant," he said, and his smirk made him look impressively smug. Like he had *won* or something. "How do you feel about entering?"

* * *

The Therapist — should I say the Interrogator? — took quick scribbles on his paper. He must have been writing in short-hand, because even if I couldn't see what he *was* writing, no one really writes that fast, do they?

He opened his mouth to speak. He spoke steadily and sternly, but still with that tinge of friendliness that I thought wasn't right for a professional like him. He asked the question very calmly:

"Could you explain to me what drew you to Janus Hartthorne?"

I thought about this. The way he talked about me, his style, his link to the outside world….

"No," I said.

Because I couldn't.

"I thought not," he agreed. "You seem like a smart young girl. Which is why this confuses me a little. It's… unlike you."

"You hardly know me," I responded, a bit quickly, but it was true.

"Perhaps it has to do with your rebellious nature," Mr Therapist asserted.

"It really doesn't."

"Therapy is a two way street, Serena," he sighed. "I can't help you if you aren't willing to be helped. Let's discuss this."

I saw the pen move quickly across the paper again. He caught on.

"You're looking at the way I write," he observed. "Do you know how to write?"

"Of course I know how to write," I snapped, perhaps too indignantly.

He held up his hands placatingly, though he didn't go so far as to verbally apologise..

"I just don't know what you've been taught," he said — "what types of learning are prioritised for a young girl in Avenue…" Then he paused and bit his lip, as if unsure whether to finish his line of thought. "Serena, did your mother ever teach you not to talk to strangers?"

* * *

Well, everyone in town was pretty excited for the pageant. Janus had people lined up around the block. Pretty much every woman in Avenue. A few men. Most of them thought it was sissy or something, men are boring like that. Plus this town ain't exactly enlightened. I mean, never has been.

I knew some of the women. There was Wick's friend Janine, and then Daisy, Tatiana, there was Ingrid, who I had been seeing a lot more of lately, good for her. Plenty of artist types and sad hopefuls — like me. I myself didn't really know what I was doing, but I went down and through the lines until I got to the audition room, which, of course, was in *The Slice*.

I was there, and then I was moving, dancing, and I was singing. It was effortless. No one had ever taught me. It was just there. And it wasn't before. Something had come to roost. I was guided. It was some serious crazy ass shit, but I was doing something. Something I never knew. …I've always been kinda short. But I wasn't no more.

I did up my hair that evening and it wasn't rough like before. I had shampooed it and thrown in conditioner and cream and it was soft. I always thought your head was supposed to be a bit scratchy.

I mean, that's how I've always been.

* * *

Swan Lake.

> ***Swan Lake*** *(Russian: Лебеди́ное о́зеро, romanized: Lebedínoje ózero, IPA: [lʲɪbʲɪˈdʲinəjə ˈozʲɪrə] listen), Op. 20, is a ballet composed by Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky in 1875–76. Despite its initial failure, it is now one of the most popular ballets of all time.*[1]

* * *

"You look different," June said at breakfast, her mouth half-full with the same rubbish cereal. The room was cold this morning and the two of us were eating our food on the bar countertop before the morning customers came in. Wick was still sleeping.

"Thanks," I smiled. I *was* different. I was.

June's face scrunches up a bit when she disagrees with something. She thinks nobody notices. "Oh no. Um. Oh gosh, I really don't want this to come across as mean, but it's. It's not right."

I looked at her and half-considered resorting to violence. Not serious violence, but still. "How exactly *am* I supposed to take that?"

June's face contorted a bit more as she got more nervous. "No, I'm — I'm not insulting you, it's not how you look. You look great. It's just. It's hard to say."

She babbled some more, and I really couldn't make out much of any of it. The words positively refused to enter my eardrums. But it was interesting, because I hadn't seen her so nervous in some time. She had been adjusting, adapting to Avenue, becoming someone I could lean on. And here she was like it was day one. She was absolutely delirious.

"Listen," she said to me, desperately. "Have you seen *Miss Congeniality*?"

"I don't think I've seen any of the films you've seen."

"Well, that's a shame considering my taste is very pedestrian," June said, all too quickly. "In *Miss Congeniality*, Sandra Bullock is a badass that works for the FBI and stops criminals and beats lame dudes up. And she has to go undercover as a model, and it's treated like the most unbelievable thing in the world. Which is ridiculous because she's played by *Sandra Bullock*."

"I don't know who Sandra Bullock is." I remarked.

"Total hottie. 9.5." June insisted. "Even if rating women by appearance is kind of against my point. Wait, how do you know who Janus Hartthorne is and not Sandra Bullock? He's way less famous. I mean, he's still famous, I know who he is, but like, it's a Simon Cowell vs Margot Robbie scenario."

I had no clue how to respond to any of this. I returned to my cereal, half-drowning out the noise.

June continued, in an epic-rant that was quickly becoming Wick-like in proportion. "Anyway, the point is, if I'm even making a point well here, is that in order for Sandra Bullock to be the superstar catwalk model that she, for the record, already is, her character has to be subjected to ludicrous, rigorous training and what's implied to be facial surgery, and hundreds of beauty products, and by the end of the movie she's assimilated. She's changed to be more appetizing to men and she gives a huge speech about how this is great. She's forgotten the badass she was, even if the movie insists she hasn't. And it's all totally fucked because she's Sandra Bullock to begin with."

June leaned in and pointed at me. She looked in my eyes, and she was terrified.

"You're Sandra Bullock. Well, I mean, you're not. But metaphorically. You're my friend because of who you *are*. You don't have to change."

* * *

Fuck me, I didn't listen.

I dunno why — was I stupid?

Don't answer that.

The thing is, I still felt so angry, so offended that June thought the way that I *was now,* now that I was better, doing well for myself, was a problem. And also, not that this is an excuse, which I keep making for some reason, but it was only June. Everyone else seemed to be proud of me. You, Wick, Terrance, Cherry. Everyone thought it was a great thing that I was competing. Tryin' something new.

And I mean, I like June a lot. Lately, she's been halfway to my best friend. But dear lord. Sometimes she gets caught up in the damnedest things.

I mean, don't we all?

* * *

I was spending more time at *The Slice*. The hours were going.

I think all the time about what people call us, the four of us with Anthea. You must have heard it. 'The Idiots'. Nice and flippant, ain't it? I admit, I even liked it at first. A bit silly. Plus… Me, June, Wick and Anthea, really we *are* a silly lot.

But then I started hearing people say it. Playground whispers. There go the Idiots, investigating the spooky old MacCreary house. Barflies chattering. There go the Idiots, chasing ghosts in the woods. Potheads behind the diner rambling. There go the Idiots, trying to unearth the Avenue deer-woman. Everyone. There go the Idiots, into the abandoned CVS building about to fall in on itself.

It starts to hurt a little. You hear enough of something and it becomes real. That's how the world works, right? Mmph. It's how *our* world works anyway.

Well, people weren't calling me an Idiot anymore. They were calling me beautiful. I had nice clothes. And I was dancing. And I was singing songs I had never heard myself sing before.

* * *

Pageant Day One was quick. I was great. I had done my hair long instead of the scraggly bun I usually wear, and I stayed away from the usual grey tones. I was going to dye my hair purple, I really wanted to, and I was going to, but then *blonde. You're going to dye your hair blonde. It'll look great.*

Obviously not. I mean, blonde with my skin tone and a pink dress? Please. I'm not Reese Witherspoon. But there was something in me that wanted to.

I thought: *Lipstick. Makeup. Fix it.*

I'd never had the need to use them before, but I put on the lipstick and makeup perfectly. It was odd. Very odd. But I was beautiful.

* * *

I'd never done anything like this but it was a little uncanny. As I made myself beautiful in that back room (and it took a lot of work) I kept getting more and more nervous. There were so many people in the room who looked nearly exactly like me. Nearly. Some were younger.

There was this girl. I kept thinking — *I feel like I know her*. Kept thinking… you'll laugh — I kept thinking she's the one from the song. *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*, the girl with Kaleidoscope eyes. Her name *was* Lucy, and her eyes sparkled brighter than mine ever could. She looked at me while I was applying my makeup. I had to re-do the blush every so often, and put more coconut essence in my hair. She watched. *She* came to work with her makeup already on. Unlike mine, hers never smears.

Lucy… Lucy's perfect. She's a natural blonde. A rhinestone princess. I felt miserable when she was around. This was *the* girl, the one they wanted, give up your bottom dollar. She was gonna win. I just knew it. Girls like her always did.

"I'm in it for the scholarship money," she told me.

I tried not to laugh. What fucking school? There ain't none down here. But then even the idea of the laugh went 'poof', because I must be wrong, because Lucy was always right.

"You're close," Lucy said, coming over while I was trying to do the *goddamn eyeliner*. "It's like this."

Oh. It's like that.

See? She's always right.

"You're really beautiful," Lucy told me. "If you use all the products, you got a chance."

I don't remember what I said back to her, I was really flattered. She said something else too. It was about the season.

"Pass me a brush," I told her.

* * *

Put it to the side. Fix your hairline.

So I did, I fixed my hairline just the way I wanted, and I plumped up my dress. I kept staring at that mirror. Maybe it was late stage jitters, but that was the first time I really thought, like for real, that something just wasn't right.

The products were helpful. I used most of them. Eyebrow shaper. Skin-care, I had eight tubes of that, most of them moisturizer. Some of the girls had got me some. They'd sold it to me.

Foundation, concealer, face-primer, highlighter, contour, colour correct, lip gloss —

You're gonna do great. You're gonna do great, I kept telling myself. Kept hoping. Still, despite all the hope in the city of dreams — does that mean Paris? — despite all that, something felt off, something was horribly, horribly wrong. I knew there was, like rolling thunder on the edge of my hearing. I just kept pushing that *horribly, horribly wrong* away —

— and I had such a headache.

I'd have said it was the hangover, but this was days after that.

* * *

Therapy Boy looked at me up over his half-moon glasses. He was a bit imperious, sitting there like that, all slow and condescending. He hadn't spoken — he was preparing to ask a question. It was a loaded one. Though saying it was *just* a loaded question sort of makes other things look less loaded in comparison. Like guns. I watched him fiddle with his little black pen some more, and then he hit me with it:

"Why did it take you so long to start listening to yourself, even just a little?"

I sort of blasted off. This guy drove me nuts.

"I don't *know,*" I hissed. "I don't know! I — I was being brainwashed. I was completely different, I wasn't myself, I was… I was wearing *pink*. I'd rather *die* than wear pink."

"You were being brainwashed?" He considered the idea, abstractly, like an interesting mathematical theorem. "I'm sorry, I must have missed that part."

"Well, I *was,*" I insisted.

The room was beigey yellow in hue and the couch was dull. All the time I'd spent recounting this whole thing, I hadn't really examined the room I was in. Not that closely. As an intentional distraction I looked at the walls. Douglas fir, probably. Painted that dull dull colour. Our good friend the Therapy Being took this as an opportunity to speak about his psychobabble, and this time, it really *really* pissed me off.

"Is that true," he asked, "or is it something you would like to believe?"

"Hey, *watch it*!" I snapped. "I don't contradict everything *you say,* Therapist Man."

"My *name* is *James*," Mr Therapist Man said reproachfully. "And — you sort of do."

I scowled. Didn't say anything. There wasn't much I could say without seeming like an ass, which was something I had been having a mighty good go of anyway.

"Can you please call me James, Serena?" Therapy McPerson asked after a moment. I'd have felt better about complying if he hadn't added, in that sanctimonious tone: "The key to good therapy is both parties treating each other with respect."

But I guessed I had to.

"Alright, James," I said, half-mumbling. "So what do you think I should have done?"

* * *

Everyone was doing their little dance. I don't know which little dance I was doing. I hardly knew anything after a while. I hardly know now. The walkway was long. I had the feeling of self-doubt in me and it was strong, having slept for so long. I knew I was where I shouldn't be. It was a runway and a dance routine. It should have be simple. *It should be simple*, I thought. *I know how to do things.*

I still haven't seen *Miss Congeniality*. Is this what it's like? Who knows.

The thing about being on stage, especially one like this with a long walk, is that even if you worry about there being an audience, you can't see them. You look out towards them, you direct yourself towards them, but since the light is on you and not them, you can't exactly really see their faces or anything. Maybe if you had perfect eyesight, but not here, not then, on this stage, where the lights were on me. I could hear them but I couldn't see them, so it was like I was alone. *I'm alone up here.*

and there was **HELLO EVERYBODY IT'S TIME FOR THE JANUS HARTTHORNE HOUR** woo woo! clap clap clap clap clap!

"Good Evening Everybody!" Janus was grinning that plastered-grin. He was on stage with us, too. I'll never forget looking at that stupid grin. Me and the girls who got through. I thought, *he's looking toward me but he's looking toward a girl behind me.* "How y'all doing tonight?!!"

It was… like when you come out of a car-wash — by the way, it kills me that we have those in Avenue, thinking about it — and you can suddenly hear that loud absence of the louder suction noise. Like waking up from a long dream. His face was radium. He was sickly green and yellow. It had been eaten away.

"The contestants we have tonight are remarkably impressive," Janus declared, and I just got this image in my head, this awful image of him drooling from the mouth at us, like we were meat. His awful sickly face and…

Obviously it wasn't there. He looked perfectly fine. He looked gorgeous. But for some reason, with all my makeup on, with all my dolled up layers, I could see what was under *his* veneer. I saw the real him. I can't really explain

it. I think we all have moments sometimes where we suddenly **stop,** more than a pause, we *freeze,* and we realise that what we've been doing is just *wrong.*

'Least, I *hope* everyone else has moments like that. Sudden epiphanies. Moments of clarity. Anyway, I used mine.

I ran.

I should have run earlier. I wish I'd run earlier. But I can't change that. And when I ran, I just kept thinking — *I'm glad I'm running.* Thinking: *I'm still who I am. That stupid little voice in my head can go rot.*

He didn't watch me as I ran offstage. As I escaped him.

"Ah well," he chuckled to the audience as I clambered offstage. "There's always one every year."

* * *

I needed to get my phone. It didn't fit in the damn tight dress. No, women have *pocketbooks* for that, there's an industry and everything. But I'm getting distracted now. I was walking backstage and it was a different world. A few stagehands looked at me with the oddest expressions but most of them didn't stop working on their business. It's a funny world and we all got our assignments; I don't blame them. I stopped by the dressing room where I'd made myself up. The phone was in there, and I walked inside, hearing the click of my own high heels on the floor. Odd, now I think about it. Sure don't remember putting those on.

I paused in front of that mirror in front of which I'd been applying makeup for the past hour. Now, I don't mean to shame nobody who uses makeup. But I'm looking in that mirror and I'm sick and green and yellow and my face has been in a motorcycle accident or two. I could see him under all this, the real him. But God. Under all this muck, I couldn't even see myself.

I wiped off the shit with a cloth and ran hot, then cold water all over my face. It hurt *good.*

Then I left.

* * *

And now we're done.

Therapy Boy finishes with his little notebook planner thing at long last. He's done taking notes and I know I'm in for a speech or two now.

"Well, at the least it does demonstrate growth," he observes.

Wow! Holy shit! Growth Demonstration! Big whoop. I sit there and look at him. Look at the room. You see, I've mentioned a bit about the room. It's beige, wooden-yellow, we've established that. Couch isn't great. A few potted plants and all. Therapy office stuff. A diploma on the wall, which I've thoroughly investigated. A picture or two of dogs and cats. All very normal.

But there are no doors in the room. There are no windows in the room. There's natural, lovely light, but it's a trick. There's no way into the room, no way out of the room.

No way we got into the room. And I have questions. First of which is one that's been poking about in my head since the start of this little tale.

"How do you know about my family?" I ask calmly but not unthreateningly, to which he raises a stern eyebrow on that same steady eye and says nothing further, at least for a moment.

I look at him as sharply as I can.

"You see," I tell him, "one of the first things you ever mentioned here was my family history of psychosis and depression, which, not only is a bit rude to bring up so casually, is family history I wouldn't even know about in the first place, on account of me being in Avenue and all. You said it confidently enough. I mean, it glossed over me for a little, made me trust you a slight bit more. But then I got thinking. And me when I get thinking, I start noticing little things like: how did I get here? Why aren't there doors? Why are your comments so un-therapy-y? How do you know so much about me? *Is* there even a therapist in Avenue?"

The thing that is definitely not a therapist looks at me as if this is another social indiscretion that he's not fond of, as opposed to a hole in the reality he's constructed around himself.

I'm still on a roll. "Now, I considered my options multiple times, obviously. You want something from me. I told you a story about myself that is very, *very* personal. Bared my soul, really. And that's almost definitely what you want, entertainment, considering most of this seems to be designed to get a rise out of yours truly. Well. I would like to be deposited home now please, Mr Therapist Entity. I've been very polite. Well, perhaps not generally, but certainly polite for someone who's been kidnapped by a thing that is not called James. But I've done my best. I've told you my truth. And I would really like to go back, because I have some people I need to apologise to."

* * *

When I came to, I was in my bed, as if I had been sleeping. I went to go and talk to Anthea first thing. She was downstairs. She was still wearing the Witch Hat from Halloween, and she was playing scrabble all by herself.

I told her what happened, and she smiled gently.

"It was an Evaluator," she said. "They come in dreams to impart moral lessons."

"Well, I already learned my moral lesson," I told Anthea.

"That is why I was not worried," Anthea replied.

I sighed, and I sat down with her by the board. It was real, real late. Which explained why no one was at the bar. And maybe it was the beige room from the dream, but these wooden walls felt so much friendlier than they had ever felt before. Usually it was dark and cold here at night, but tonight I felt warm.

It had been a week or two since the thing with Hartthorne had down, for the record. Janus had disappeared overnight. Even now, I don't know where he went, but *The Slice* looks like it's been boarded up for years. Common sense tells me that somebody else could probably use it, but part of me wants it to sit there and slowly die.

I sighed. "I still haven't talked to June since it all happened."

Anthea nodded. "You hold a burden?"

I considered. "Yes," I said.

"Then you will speak to her," Anthea stated. "And only then let it be lifted."

"Piss," I said, and I knew she was right.

* * *

I knocked on June's door. Maybe it was too late at night. Maybe I should come back tomorrow. Maybe I should put it off even more. Maybe I was ruining things, maybe —

"Come in," June said, and I opened the door.

She was lounging on her bed looking at an old television set that she and Wick had scavenged. It was a very small monitor. Skinny-ish. June had wanted something other than the big box-y ones that you could find anywhere in Avenue. Something about them being at *Big Gazpacho's Motor Lodge*.

June had popcorn.

"It's really late," I said, which was a pathetic way to begin a conversation.

"Yeah, my sleep schedule's fucked." June shrugged.

"What are you watching?" I asked, half-avoiding the conversation I didn't actually *want* to have.

"*Legally Blonde,"* June said. "Now *this* is a movie. Come on, sit. You haven't movie-ed enough, you've told me so."

She slapped her fist on one side of the bed, and scooted over. She passed me the popcorn.

I sat there, feeling as awkward as anything, being with a friend I hadn't actually apologised to while they weren't even paying that much attention.

"…What's it about?" I asked after three or so seconds of too much silence.

"It's like… the inverse of *Miss Congeniality*," June said. "Reece Witherspoon goes to Harvard to be a Lawyer and gets told by society she has to **conform!** And Reece Witherspoon wins because she stays true to who she is rather than Sandra Bullock-ing all over the place, and it's *so* great."

"Why aren't you watching this with Wick?" I asked, a bit self-deflatedly. "I thought he was the movie person."

"Oh, he can't stand Chick Flicks." June reached for the popcorn.

I sat there. I didn't know what to do. Eventually I blurted "I'm sorry!" out and was going to go on a whole tangent but June looked at me. She already understood.

"I had figured you already felt so bad that it was better that nobody rubbed it in any more," June said, and it was so kind, and I had really needed it, and I don't deserve her as a friend.

But hey. Life's like that. And even if it wasn't 'beautiful' or whatever, that's the thing about it, because the thing about it is that life is always better than you remember.

Which kinda sounds like something Elle Woods would say.